

Durham Research Online

Deposited in DRO:

03 August 2018

Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Aroles, J. and McLean, C. (2016) 'Deciphering signs : an empirical apprenticeship.', *Ethnography*, 18 (2). pp. 175-192.

Further information on publisher's website:

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138116664543>

Publisher's copyright statement:

Aroles, J. McLean C. (2017). Deciphering signs: an empirical apprenticeship. *Ethnography* 18(2): 175-192. Copyright © The Author(s) 2016. Reprinted by permission of SAGE Publications.

Use policy

The full-text may be used and/or reproduced, and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- a full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- a [link](#) is made to the metadata record in DRO
- the full-text is not changed in any way

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

Please consult the [full DRO policy](#) for further details.

Deciphering signs: an empirical apprenticeship

Jeremy Aroles^{1*} and Christine McLean¹

¹University of Manchester, Alliance Manchester Business School, M15 6PB, Manchester, UK.

*Corresponding author

ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to explore how an apprenticeship through signs (Deleuze, 2000) can inform ethnographic inquiries. Upon engaging with signs, one can develop new empirical sensibilities that could allow for the appreciation of the flows, forces and intensities encountered during such research processes. In particular, it enables us to attend to those aspects of research that we may struggle to capture or illuminate. We suggest naming such endeavour nomadography in order to emphasize the move away from anthropocentric accounts and to reflect the iterative, polymorphic and experiential nature of this approach. We also draw on a brief extract from some fieldwork in Fiji that focused on the ‘discovery’ of a new plant species. In particular, we wish to explore how a nomadographic approach provides a way of rejuvenating our thinking conceptually, empirically and methodologically by rethinking these three interconnecting and overlapping aspects of the research process.

KEY WORDS

Research methodology, signs, Gilles Deleuze, apprenticeship, experience, ethnography

Word count: 8199

1. INTRODUCTION

Deleuze's (2000)ⁱ reading of Proust's composition (*A la Recherche du temps perdu*) is that of a complex and multi-layered apprenticeship through signs. Not only does it present an insightful commentary linking together many different concepts relating to time, truth and semiotics, but it also provides a basis upon which to consider various ways of engaging with research. Within this paper, we focus on the insights, images and thoughts surrounding an apprenticeship through signs (Deleuze 2000). This will include exploring how the conceptual ideas underlying this approach can help to inform ethnographic inquiry by attending to these aspects of research that we may struggle to make sense of, capture or illuminate. In particular, rather than starting with entities (such as objects, researchers, etc.) existing out-there independently in strictly delimited spaces, an apprenticeship through signs directs our attention to the flows of intensities and forces as they emerge through actions, events and encounters. An engagement with signs in this way provides the basis upon which certain events (as complex assemblages of forces and intensities) can become 'sensible' or discerned. Illuminating how our research activities seek to engage with the forces, flows and intensities that connect to the making and manifestation of signs and relational truths is crucial to this process of unfolding events and mapping encounters. More specifically, such an engagement with signs involves a

shift away from merely knowing and representing empirical sites in order to develop ways of learning and experimenting through these engagements.

We suggest calling such methodological endeavour nomadographicⁱⁱ in reference to the figure of the nomad (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). This terminology seeks to highlight the iterative, experiential and event-centred nature of this approach and establishes a move away from what might be called an anthropocentric approach to ethnographic research. The journey of the nomadic ethnographer, or better the nomadographer, does not have a departure or an arrivalⁱⁱⁱ - intensive signs guide the quest of the nomadographer. Furthermore, a nomadographic approach seeks to inform ethnographic inquiries by suggesting a particular mode of researching and exploring empirical sites that attempts to capture the various flows of becoming and intensity and the different rhythms associated with particular forms of space, time and action. Through such an inquiry, the empirical field is understood through a-signifying signs. Rather than assuming the existence of individuals, objects, qualities or places, attention is drawn to the intensive forces and flows and the becoming of subjects and objects through particular and complex encounters. A focus on intensive forces also involves a particular way of understanding the notion of 'empirical site'. Building upon the original meaning of empirical as relating to experiences, we posit that the 'empirical' is the result of a process of assembling and the creation of spaces in which the researcher engages with particular intensities and forms of relationality. In that sense, rather than an object pre-supposing a

subject (or the other way around), the focus shifts to the mutual constitution of intensive forces and the becoming of extensive forms through these complex and relational assemblages. As such, Proust's book is for Deleuze an empirical site in the same way as any setting may be empirical for a social scientist. Therefore, a nomadographer shares Deleuze's attempt to unfold signs in order to explore "*a hitherto unknown and unheard-of world of problems*" (Deleuze, 2004: 241)^{iv}.

The main objective of this article is therefore to articulate certain sensibilities that could enable researchers to explore the flows, intensities and forces associated with particular events through a focus on signs. This aligns with other research calling for the rejuvenation of research methodologies in empirical research (Savage and Burrows, 2007; Stewart, 2007; Rabinow et al., 2008; Pink, 2009; Helmreich, 2011; Back and Puwar, 2012; Lury and Wakeford, 2012; Marrero-Guillamón, 2015; Vannini, 2015). This call has been paralleled by attempts to find alternative ways of writing empirical accounts, which allow a movement away from "*the fantasy that the author, the subject of theory, is located outside the object of reflection*" (Mol, 2008: 32). As noted by Viveiros de Castro (2004), this is about finding ways of expressing the "*intentio of the original language (...) with the new one*" (2004: 5). By developing ways of integrating Deleuzian thinking into our approaches to ethnographic research, we also wish to contribute to this debate on 'account making' in terms of the research process. Moreover, this includes a shift from away from merely using Deleuzian concepts as a way of *reading* particular empirical

accounts towards an ‘empirical engagement’ *with* Deleuze (Mazzei, 2010). In other words, this article attempts to meditate upon the possibilities of adopting a Deleuzian, or Deleuze-inspired, *point de vue* (viewpoint and point of view) in the field by focusing on an apprenticeship of signs. In the light of the miscellany of the possibilities in terms of exploring these ideas (see [Coleman and Ringrose, 2013] for instance), the ideas developed in this paper seek to focus on constituting *a* sensibility to Deleuze’s work, through a particular sensitivity and sensibility to semiotics with regards to ideas of time, truth and relationality.

In order to explore these issues in more depth, we begin by providing a brief overview of the literature that has sought to engage empirically with Deleuze’s work. We then examine how Deleuze (2000) approaches semiotics in relation to the conceptual focus on signs, apprenticeship and learning. Next, in order to situate these issues, the paper briefly examines an account of a scientific expedition to the South Pacific. This is followed by an exploration of the possibilities connected to an apprenticeship through signs in relation to this specific empirical account. Finally, through a more detailed discussion of a nomadographic apprenticeship through signs, we explore further the implications and possibilities for this style of enquiry.

2. DELEUZE, RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES AND ETHNOGRAPHY

The wealth of theoretical commentaries relating to the thinking of the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze has vastly outnumbered detailed empirical and ethnographic engagements with Deleuze's work (Mazzei and McCoy, 2010; Coleman and Ringrose, 2013; Duff, 2014). There have nonetheless been various attempts to engage empirically with Deleuzian philosophy. This has included experimenting with Deleuzian forms of writing (St Pierre, 1997; Davies, 2009), deploying transcendental empiricism (Rai, 2011; Duff, 2014) and investigating empirically the notion of becoming (Biehl and Locke, 2010), to name but a few. Various authors from anthropology have also sought to develop ideas from the work of Deleuze (see Wagner 2001; Strathern, 2005; Viveiros de Castro, 2009; Jensen and Rødge, 2013; Latour, 2013). Coleman and Ringrose's (2013) edited volume on Deleuze and research methodologies provides an extremely rich source of studies and empirical themes. In particular, it investigates the possibilities of coupling the following techniques with Deleuzian thinking: ethnography, interviewing, visual and sensory methods, online methods and finally, data collection and analysis. Semetsky (2006; 2007) also provides some very interesting ideas and possibilities connected to Deleuzian concepts and an apprenticeship through signs in relation to educational learning and pedagogical matters.

Others who have combined Deleuzian concepts with an ethnographic style of enquiry have also shown how such an assemblage can be productive in the study of specific events, times and truth-making activities. For example, during fieldwork

conducted in Guatemala, Mahler (2008) explored lived time through a focus on atmospheres. Drawing from both Bergson and Deleuze, she set “*to study time in its raw state, before it gets coerced into representations*” (Mahler, 2008: 54). In terms of methodology, she takes her inspiration from Deleuze and Guattari’s treatment of schizoanalysis (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983) and posits schizoanalysis as a way of exploring empirical atmospheres and events. In a very different style, Crociani-Windland (2011) also adopts an ethnographic style of investigation in order to explore Central Italian communities through various events (such as traditional festivals). Her focus is on encounters and on the experiential dimension of these events, and she insists on the fact that “*the theoretical approach adopted is organic to the issues explored*” (Crociani-Windland, 2011: 2). This then highlights the complex enmeshment between conceptual concerns and methodological endeavours. Finally, through a focus on Goa’s trance festivals, Saldanha (2007) engages in an ethnographic form of inquiry in order to put forward a new “*conception of race as a heterogeneous process of differentiation involving the materiality of bodies and spaces*” (2007: 9). While research in this area has clearly contributed to the development of new ethnographic sensibilities and directions inspired by the work of Gilles Deleuze, within this paper we seek to develop this further by investigating how a nomadographic apprenticeship through signs could provide additional insights into addressing research questions relating to signs, truth and

relationality and how this could inform our approaches to empirical research and the way we learn and experiment as we engage in ethnographic account making.

3. DELEUZIAN SEMIOTICS AND THE NOTION OF APPRENTICESHIP

In order to gauge how an apprenticeship through signs might inform the research process, we need to present Deleuzian semiotic as well as the relation between signs and apprenticeship that Deleuze (2000) extricates from his reading of Proust's masterpiece. Deleuze's approach to signs and semiotics brings a significant rupture from conventional linguistic thinking, as it takes the form of a literary inquiry. Rethinking signs through Deleuze's work can be a rather daunting task given the multiple meanings and attachments Deleuze employs in relation to the notion of sign throughout his work (Colombat, 2000). However, there is a clear refusal to associate signs to notions of representation (Zourabichvili, 1994) and a distancing from the couple signifier/signified underlies his semiotics. For Colombat (2000), Deleuze's a-signifying signs can be approached as "*intensive and immanent signals expressing, marking and unfolding the powers of a given milieu or heterogeneous arrangement*" (2000: 18). Deleuze develops his concept of signs most significantly in *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* (Deleuze, 1992), in *Difference and Repetition* (Deleuze, 2004), in *Logic of Sense* (Deleuze, 1990) and in *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). However, it

is in *Proust and Signs* that he truly lays the foundation of his semiotics.

In *Proust and Signs*, Deleuze (2000) offers a reading of Marcel's Search whereby he focuses on the different signs encountered by Marcel through his journey to unveil the 'truth' of Combray. Marcel's search could be read through many different lenses and no unity seems to assemble the many fragments of which the novels are made. Throughout *Proust and Signs*, rather than providing a definition for signs (Drohan, 2009) Deleuze seeks to engage with the 'interpretation' of signs. Although the idea of interpretation in *Proust and Signs* can be misleading as it may provide the image of the Search (*la Recherche*) as some phenomenological endeavour. At this point, it may be important to consider the genesis of Deleuze's book on Proust: to the original text published in 1968, a second section was subsequently added in 1970. If the original text revolved around the interpretation of signs, the focal point of the added section clearly is the production and multiplication of signs (Mengue, 2009). In other words, while the original text of 1968 may convey the idea that signs hold some 'truth' (or that some truth is to be found in signs), the later Deleuze seems to challenge this idea and engages to a greater extent with ideas revolving around literary machines^v (Drohan, 2009; Mengue, 2010). Having said that, and as noted by Bogue (2001), the difference between the two parts of *Proust and Signs* is "one of degree and emphasis rather than substance" (2001: 28). Whether signs are mere literary devices, intensive assemblages, or productions of machinic processes, they entice us to explore events and atmospheres (see Sloterdijk, 2011). This is not in a

phenomenological sense, but through encounters with pre-subjective sensations and experiences. An apprenticeship through signs involves engaging with the intensive forces underlying the making of object/subject positions, dualism, divides, etc. Therefore, a close reading of the text, along with an appreciation of the genesis of the book, allows one to posit that the interpretation is not phenomenological, but rather experiential and experimental.

For Deleuze (2000), signs are vital to the search: Marcel's search amounts to a process of learning – an apprenticeship (*un apprentissage*) – that can only be achieved through encounters with different types of signs. In that sense, signs become associated with apprenticeship (i.e. with the act of learning) – this further distances the apprenticeship from phenomenological endeavour as this apprenticeship is about learning as opposed to understanding; “*everything that teaches us something emits signs*” (Deleuze, 2000: 4). The distinction between learning and understanding is pivotal to the appreciation of how an apprenticeship through signs would differ from a phenomenological mode of inquiry. While understanding would refer to cognitive abilities and to a strictly ordered process of recognition and assimilation, learning denotes an engagement with the un-known, a particular way of experiencing with signs as they emerge through events. The Proustian apprenticeship is complex and multi-layered – while at first Marcel is overwhelmed by all the signs he encountered, he can progressively make his way through these signs, as such an apprenticeship provides him with the basis

to approach and engage with signs. This relation between signs and the process of learning, which is as a key to Proust's masterpiece, lays the foundations for this paper.

For Deleuze (2000), Marcel encounters four types of signs during the course of his apprenticeship^{vi}. The first type of signs that Deleuze encounters in his reading of Proust is the worldly sign. Worldly signs represent the first contact of Marcel with the world of signs (Deleuze, 2000). Elucidating worldly signs would, for instance, allow Marcel to understand why Charlus' charisma vanishes when he is at the Verdurins'. A sign is accompanied by a feeling, a sensation that compels us to search for its meaning (the ultimate search for the truth of signs). In the case of the worldly signs, the meaning is directly associated to the object – the object is thought to hold the truth of the sign it emits. As such, worldly signs are associated with the trap of objectivism and for Deleuze (2000), this leads to the dismay of worldly signs. It is not the object that holds the truth of the signs even though the sign emanates from it (Bogue, 2001). One can associate the sign to the object and simply engage in recognitions or rather, acknowledge the fact that while the worldly sign “*designates an object, it signifies something different*” (Deleuze, 2000: 27). The second type of signs is the sign of love. While a form of objectivism characterizes worldly signs, it is subjectivity that portrays the signs of love. With the signs of love, one seeks to interpret the signs of a lover through one's own world; it is one's own subjective interpretation of experiences. It is not surprising that Deleuze (2000) associates this sign with jealousy; regardless of the engagement of Marcel with these

signs, he can never access the worlds of his lovers (or rather the world that his lovers share with other persons, such as Albertine). This includes a wealth of relations, situations and atmospheres that remain alien to him. With the sign of love, the object becomes a sign that subsequently starts forming part of a series with other objects. This shift to subjectivism is in part a response to a disappointment with the worldly signs, with Deleuze describing Marcel's "*disappointment of the object [as] he attempts to find a subjective compensation*" (Deleuze, 2000: 36). Both the disappointment of the worldly signs and the jealousy triggered by the signs of love propel Marcel towards a third type of sign: the sensuous signs. With sensuous signs, meaning is no longer expressed in an object or in a series of objects. In contrast, sensuous signs lead to the universal quality of signs that entail entering and navigating through new worlds. This includes the famous episode of 'la madeleine' (Proust, 2004)^{vii}. Through the tasting of *la madeleine* with his aunt Léonie, Marcel is described as experiencing the emergence of a Combray rising from the pure past. This encounter is an example of such sensuous signs. Contrary to the first three types of signs, the fourth kind – the sign of art – is depicted as immaterial; "*the artistic sign is an essence, an idea, not a material entity*" (Bogue, 2001: 7). For Drohan (2009), the sign of art "*is not so much a sign as much as it is the power of signing itself*" (2009: 20). An apprenticeship process that aligns with the signs of art informs the whole of Marcel's Search as this allows him to unravel the other signs he encounters. The

apprenticeship through signs can be seen as a form of craftwork that embodies the assembling of different intensities and forces through this process of becoming.

While Deleuze extricates four different types of signs, by no means does he attempt to establish them as independent entities. Signs manifest, connect and are embedded in different worlds; yet, it is key to remember that “*the Search is presented as the exploration of different worlds of signs which are organized in circles and intersect at certain points*” (Deleuze, 2000: 4). Clearly these circles are not concentric, which further implies that these worlds do not share a common essence or origin. In that sense, depending upon the world(s) considered, signs will take different ‘meaning’, will not appear the same or simply will not “*allow themselves to be deciphered in the same manner*” (Deleuze, 2000: 5). Finally, the multiplicity of signs does not mean that signs change, but rather relationships with signs may change (Drohan, 2009) as signs are ultimately linked to the assemblages through which they emerge.

We can also see how such an apprenticeship with signs connects to the work of Deleuze within *Difference and Repetition* and how we can understand the difference and repetition that underlie the action of learning to swim through an encounter with signs:

“Learning to swim or learning a foreign language means composing the singular points of one’s own body or one’s own language with those of another shape or element, which

tears us apart but also propels us into a hitherto unknown and unheard-of world of problems” (2004: 241)^{viii}.

The Sea emits a variety of signs that the swimmer must decipher and negotiate with in order to proceed with his apprenticeship. While someone can learn a series of moves and further break them into very specific and coordinated patterns of action, when it comes to actually swimming, one has to deal with water undulations, particular dynamics, water viscosity, etc. as many intensities that ‘frame’ or rather impact on the experience of swimming. Similarly, one cannot simply learn how to swim by repeating moves and being instructed how to coordinate movements once in the water.

For Deleuze (2000), to engage with the experiential dimension of signs and signing practices requires a movement away from ideas of representation and signifier and a focus on the intensive and extensive relationship. As Colombat (2000) states, “*a sign reveals an essence that is no longer an abstraction of the mind but the active power of a world that only a musical phrase, an intensive, pre-signifying expression, can unfold*” (2000: 17). In that sense, the forces and intensities emerging through experience become prevalent over the signification of the interpretation; “*the signifier is really the last philosophical metamorphosis of the despot*” (Deleuze, 1985: 149). Therefore, while the signifier may be seen as compelling us to remain within striated forms of space, connected to certain forms of coding and abiding with such codes (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), in

contrast an apprenticeship through signs seeks to propel us to explore smooth-like forms of space and intensive processes. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) argue that “*in striated space, one closes off a surface and "allocates" it according to determinate intervals, assigned breaks; in the smooth, one "distributes" oneself in an open space, according to frequencies and in the course of one's crossings*” (1987: 481)^{ix}. As such, an apprenticeship through signs involves a form of nomadism whereby the relational engagements of different intensities and forces become the undertakings of the learner, not the indiscriminate following of rules. In that sense, learning through signs attempts to grasp the unspoken, the not-yet-articulated or in more Deleuzian terms, the intensities and forces emanating from the intensive sphere (Deleuze, 2005). Thus, rather than finding truth within signs, a focus on the a-signifying dimension of signs can lead to approaching notions of time, truth and relationality through empirical encounters, events and engagements in a very different way.

Attempting to put into motion the idea of apprenticeship through signs can lead the researcher to confront two major problems. Firstly, rather than simply ‘applying’ Deleuze’s semiotic taxonomy, any ‘appropriation’ of a particular conceptual device implies a process of alteration. As Massumi (2002) states in relation to the work of Deleuze:

“The first rule of thumb if you want to invent or reinvent concepts is simple: don’t apply them. If you apply a concept or system of connection between concepts, it is the material

you apply it to that undergoes change, much more markedly than do the concepts”
(2002:17).

This is a critical point for this approach. While Deleuze (2000) extricates four types of signs from his reading of Proust, we do not seek to ‘apply’ such a ‘semiotic taxonomy’ in our research. In contrast, it is the intricate relation between signs, the process of learning and the continual process of searching for and experimenting with signs, truth and images of thought that lies at the heart of our endeavour.

The second problem relates to the ‘framing’ of an apprenticeship through signs. Methodological endeavour and sensibilities cannot just be transferred from one setting to another as any event or encounter is unique – while things may appear to repeat in the image of the Same, Deleuze (2004) highlights how difference underlies repetition and how novelty then emerges from what appears to be the repetition of the Same. This also connects to the example of the swimmer given by Deleuze (2004) as rather than learning by imitating an instructor or simply following some codified rules, this process relies on experiencing or experimenting with the signs encountered (in the case of the swimmer, the signs emitted by the different intensive forces relating to the sea, the swimmer’s body, etc.). Furthermore, researchers may react to signs in different ways and how we ‘learn from’ and ‘perceive’ signs relates primarily to the assemblages we form part of and to the sensibilities that we may be more akin to develop. In contrast to signs simply waiting to

be discovered by the researcher, they emerge through complex relational, material and intensive forces underlying our research activities, conceptual engagements and empirical encounters. To illustrate these issues in further detail, we introduce below an account taken from an on-going exploration of scientific practices within a field study. In particular, we describe how this study was informed by a nomadographic apprenticeship through signs.

4. TROPICAL FOREST: ENCOUNTERS AND DISCOVERY

As part of an ongoing project investigating knowledge and truth-making practices connected to evolutionary biology, this research entailed exploring scientific practices in different forms of space over a period of two years. This included following scientists during a five-week fieldtrip to Fiji in 2015. The principal aim of the trip was to collect and study a specific group of epiphytic plants (i.e. plants that grow on trees) that is solely found on a few Pacific islands. As that particular group of plants has seldom been studied, it was pivotal to assemble rich ‘field data’ (i.e. ecological data) on these plants. The researchers arranged for a curator from the national university of that South Pacific state and for many local guides to assist them throughout the course of the fieldwork.

The scientists came to the field armed with a wealth of scientific devices, such as GPS, devices to record temperature variations, herbarium press, various chemicals to

conduct on-field experiments, just to name but a few. Prior to the departure for this scientific mission, the scientists carefully studied several ancient manuscripts: floras of the South Pacific, reports from 19th century explorers, diaries of botanists, etc. These manuscripts were viewed to provide useful information concerning the potential location of the plants studied. In that sense, the field study started prior to the actual arrival to the South Pacific Island through the various actions associated with the preparation of the expedition (e.g. the study of many documents, the process of obtaining collection permits and contacting the local university, etc.). Through all these different actions, devices and documents, the researchers sought to impose upon the tropical jungle the *modus operandi* of the laboratory. In other words, the first move of the scientists was to attempt to move the laboratory and its practices into the field. The recourse to devices used to locate plants resulted in the jungle being relegated to a matter of longitudinal and latitudinal coordinates, or to a series of points on a map.

Upon using the different locating devices and the coordinates reported in the different reports, the scientists succeeded in locating the various species of plants. This further allowed them to assemble ecological data and to perform many experiments. When exploring further the jungle (looking for other specimens of the plants they just managed to locate), scientists came across some plant specimens that were morphologically different from the known species of that group of plants. As these plants are epiphytic and need a certain degree of light, they are often found higher up in the

canopy. In order to verify whether or not these plants could potentially be new species, the scientists decided that it was pivotal to climb up the tree where these plants had been seen in order to take a closer look and to collect a specimen as well as leaf samples. On closer scrutiny, the scientists thought that the morphological differences were significant enough to suggest that these plants might be new species (i.e. plants that had not been discovered or described before). In order to confirm that the specimens found are ‘truly new species’, the scientists have to sequence some genes and compare the sequences obtained to existing DNA sequences of close plant relatives. If the sequences of the presumably new species are deemed to be different enough from the existing sequences, these specimens will become new species; in the case they do not, they would merely constitute natural variations to existing species. Once this has been confirmed, the scientists then have to produce herbarium sheets to be sent to the main herbaria in the world. Then, the scientists need to name the new specie following strictly established rules: the name is composed of two parts, the name of the genus and the name of the species. As the plants discovered represented new species of a known genus, the scientists solely had to create a species name. Finally, the scientists published an article including information about the morphology of the new species as well as their locations. Aside from its scientific interest, such publication also aims to enhance the conservation of these plants that are endemic to these Pacific islands (an undescribed species cannot be protected by any law).

5. SIGNS, ENCOUNTERS AND APPRENTICESHIP: THE DISCOVERY OF A NEW PLANT SPECIES

While the above account provides the image of a smooth and uncomplicated progression and process of discovery through time and space, it is possible to explore the different encounters connected with the fieldtrip that underlie this account. We could, for example, describe the different visual encounters and the material semiotics underlying the process. Despite the distance, while walking around the tropical forest the scientists saw what appeared to be a ‘new’ species of plant up in the trees. In this case, certain signs emanate through this visual encounter as the scientists begin to question whether this is in fact a ‘new’ species with ‘new’ problems emerging and calls for further experiential encounters. At this distance (between the scientists and the plants), it is not possible to either confirm or refute the possibility of the discovery of a new plant species. The initial encounter, problem making and experimenting led to further actions, such as setting up the climbing gears for the scientists, preparing the material needed to collect specimens and leaf samples, adding the proper lens to the camera for close-ups, as well as further interventions. All these actions were motivated by the attempt to learn more about that plant specimen and as such became not only an engagement with the future (discovery) but also with the past.

The ‘distant’ visual encounter produced a wealth of intensive forces and signing practices relating to the scientists and the plant specimens, which enable certain expressions and assemblages to emerge. Through the ‘coming together’ of various forces and intensities, a plethora of signs thus become manifested. In other words, rather than signs being simply produced by discrete entities, they emerge through particular relational encounters and signing practices. Each encounter with the plant species therefore relies on the assemblage of different signs and a-signifying practices: signs associated with the scientific devices, the material used, the plants, the scientist’s expectations and previous experiences, the environment where the plant has been found, the knowledge and understanding of the locals, etc. In other words, the encounter with the plant corresponds to the assembling of different forces, bodies and intensities that produce certain actions and outcomes, as they coalesce in these moments of encounter and allow alternative ways of learning and engaging with the empirical site. Moreover, the apprenticeship through signs could be seen as occurring at two levels: the scientist’s apprenticeship with signs and the nomadographer studying their ‘truth-making’ practices through a focus on signs emerging from the event. This includes reflecting on the different images and scripts that underlie the different assemblages of signs underlying the work of the scientists. Besides, there were many different possibilities of engaging with this research process for both the scientists and nomadographer. For instance, the scientists’ attention was focused on specific group of plants and they did not engage with other plant

genera that could be found in the same area, despite some of them potentially being new plant species. In that sense, the encounters in which the scientists became involved in relation to their own sensibilities, just like the directions taken by an apprenticeship through signs revolve around the researchers' own sensibilities and to the assemblages to which they are most prone to form part. Importantly, this engagement is not a matter of subjectivity, but rather a product of this complex process of relationality and assembling. However, an apprenticeship through signs opens up spaces to explore the different ways in which intensities became assembled and how they may perform certain roles and positions through specific forms of engagement: the scientists, the plants to be studied, the nomadographer studying the practices of the scientists, etc.

At first, we may seem stuck in our incapacity to access or to grasp signs: signs are overwhelming, caught between various worlds and actualize relations that transcend the entities that are seen as associated with signs. In other words, signs surpass our cognitive abilities in such a way that one cannot simply 'look out' for signs and explain their meaning. In contrast, one needs to engage deeply with signing practices, rhizomatic connections and the process of assembling in order to develop particular sensibilities to signs and to find ways of explicating (literally 'unfolding') them. As noted by Drohan (2009), signs force us to think by urging us to search for the 'meanings' of signs (yet, there is no meaning to be found and it is perhaps in the absence of meaning that we can engage in a process of learning). In other words, signs "*impinge on thought, induce*

desiquilibrium and disorientation” (Bogue, 2001: 4). Through an apprenticeship with signs, researchers can focus their attention on the relational and performative dimension of events and encounters, rather than on discrete entities (objects, subjects, etc.). Such a positioning involves dissolving any *a priori* divides relating to the research process and the empirical field (such as nature/culture, subject/object, etc.).

A focus on signs from that perspective may allow researchers to challenge existentialist accounts of the field (as one does not start with entities existing out there independently) as well as anthropocentric approaches. Conversely, by exploring the material forces and intensities as they emerge through the course of the research, neither humans nor human narratives dominate, as the apprenticeship is guided by the many flows of intensities and forces associated with a process of a-signifying signing. In that sense, such as focus on signs not only blurs well-established dualities (e.g. social/natural, human/non-human, etc.), but also the line between organized and carefully delimited spaces, thus propelling the research to explore various temporalities and spatialities. However, in contrast to multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995), the apprenticeship through signs does not involve exploring different places, with the idea of places as materially bounded. Following signing practices may then propel researchers both in spatial and in temporal ways beyond a traditional sense of space and time^x. This may include blurring the spatial delimitations of the laboratory, the herbarium, scientific conferences, etc. and temporal intensities connected to ‘past’ events (previous reports

published, monographs, cartographic inscriptions, etc.) and future actions and expectations (confirming the status of the plant in the laboratory, naming the plant, publishing its discovery, etc.). Such an assembling of signs can establish rhizomatic links and connections between different times, spaces and forms of action and can allow the researcher to explore and learn from events in a non-dualistic and experimental manner. Moreover, by challenging *a priori* assumptions, it becomes possible to engage with different signs within a range of settings in the same way that learning to swim requires a relational engagement with many different signs (Deleuze, 2004). Furthermore, exploring signs in this way enables us to capture the flows, the assemblages and the differentiating forces related to an event.

As Deleuze (2000) notes, the sign refuses to be satisfied by any objective (worldly signs), subjective (signs of love) or qualitative (sensuous signs) meaning; signs ceaselessly repeat different interpretations and upon doing so challenge any fixed interpretation of signs. Signs are not meant to be simply interpreted but need to be experienced. Upon experimenting and experiencing with signs, the researcher may be in the position of touching upon the virtual as it actualizes through intensities and forces that become mapped through a focus on signs. As experienced by Marcel, this is a never-ending search of all the objects, signs and meaning associated to a particular event and the continuing disappointment with the ‘significance’ and ‘interpretation’ given to signs (hence the ceaseless search for new meanings and interpretations and the inner vitality of

the search). The practitioner of such an infinite search – in this case the researcher – is like an obsessed ‘Egyptologist’ (Drohan, 2009), engaging with the interpretation of signs, but always far beyond whatever they may signify and ceaselessly looking for their ‘truth’. Therefore, rather than truth being held within signs it is created through relational signing practices and truth-making activities. By paying greater attention to these relational and dynamic processes, we can become further propelled towards encountering further signing practices, as they become actualized through specific events. For example, we explored how in the case of the scientists, the signing practices associated with the possibility of having encountered a new species of plants led to further actions behind undertaken – actions combining both the pure past (e.g. knowledge gathered from examining manuscripts and floras) and the future (e.g. scaling a tree, sequencing DNA in the laboratory, etc.). This allows us to acknowledge the assembling of many forces and intensities through an encounter with signs as well as the complex entanglements of spatialities and temporalities. In other words, we can become sensible to the unfolding of particular worlds through signs that enable us to catch sight of certain moments of pure intensity as we seek to engage with the complex relationship between the intensive and extensive (Deleuze, 2005).

6. CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A NOMADOGRAPHIC METHODOLOGY

As compared to what we may want to call more ‘traditional’ ethnographic approaches, the action of learning through signs calls for the adoption of a far less rigid and much more experience-oriented approach to research activities. In that regard, this paper aligns itself with the turn towards pre-subjective and non-representational forms of experiencing and researching in the methodology literature. This further entails that there is no formal approach to how one learns through signs: it is something that one has to learn through a process of apprenticeship. As in the case of swimming (Deleuze, 2004), we cannot learn by imitating the undertakings of an instructor, as we need to engage thoroughly and intensively with signs. It further entails that there is a wide degree of freedom as to the sort of ‘techniques’ the researcher may want to develop in order to explore signs. It may be worth noting that an apprenticeship through signs would require an engagement with many different techniques rather than just one. The empirical researcher may need to multiply the techniques deployed, constantly going back and forth between these and ceaselessly looking for new possibilities as the researcher needs to be on the ‘look-out’ (*être aux aguets*) for new ways of engaging with the world. An empirical engagement with signs therefore allows one to overcome, to challenge and somehow to decode the strongly established operating grid of methodological practices. If we were to think about this process in terms of smooth and striated forms of space (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), an engagement with signs allows the researcher to engage with the smoothing of the striating grid of methodological practices rather than being restricted by

the over-coding of striating processes^{xi}. In other words, this would entail attempting to challenge some of the paradigmatic dimensions of methodology through the decoding of research practices and methods and through the opening towards the unknown, i.e. that which we may struggle to capture through our research. This also involves that the conceptual ideas along with the empirical accounts become fused through the course of nomadographic form of inquiry. We can here draw a parallel with the ‘athwart theory’, that involves “*thinking of theory neither as set above the empirical nor as simply deriving from it, but as crossing the empirical transversely*” (Helmreich 2009:23).

We would also like to join with Deleuze (2000) where he suggests that the search needs to be taken seriously: it is not some poetic or esoteric undertaking, but rather an intensive exploration. While the search is not some rigidly ordered undertaking, it is neither a domain of absolute chaos or disorder. In this regard, the search strives to maintain a delicate balance between order & chaos, certainty & uncertainty, and rigor & flexibility. As noted by Viveiros de Castro (2009), “*Deleuzian dualities are constructed and transformed according to a recurring schema that determines them as minimal multiplicities*” (2009: 88). Many parallels can be drawn between Marcel’s Search and the activities of a researcher, as an apprenticeship with signs can allow us to engage with different aspects of the research process that we may struggle to capture through more standardized and codified research methods. This includes engaging with how relational signing affects us and how it relates to experiences that transcend our cognitive abilities

of interpretation. The action of learning through signs therefore propels researchers to turn themselves towards experience as actualized through the flows of intensities, forces, desires and difference that are encountered in an empirical setting. In many ways, this is an experimental methodology that seeks to challenge methodological representations by suggesting a nomadic form of inquiry aiming to unveil or rather touch upon the invisible and the not-yet-articulated.

It is also important to note that researching does not end with the fieldwork as account making can take make forms. This is particularly important when we consider the writing practices underlying the production of nomadographic accounts. Bonelli (2015) argues that this can involve the use of humour to ensure an ongoing process of learning and engagement with different sensibilities; *“scholars wanting to reinforce processes of ongoing learning about multiple realities (and willing to escape capture in ethnographic writing) might benefit from developing and protecting humoristic sensibilities”* (2015: 183). A reflexive stance on our writing practices also includes embracing and acknowledging the limitations underlying one’s research or any tendencies to over-emphasize certain aspects of an event.

To conclude, a nomadographic enquiry seeks to direct our attention away from a focus on ‘ethnos’ (a people, a nation) towards nomadic forms of exploration. However, this change in terminology not only provides an alternative to anthropocentric form of analysis, but also a shift away from a representational approach to research. The field then

becomes an undifferentiated field of forces and desires that the researcher can explore through a thorough and intensive engagement with signs. As noted by Coleman and Ringrose (2013), “*nomadic thinking is a way of attending to what Deleuze terms ‘molecular becoming’*” (2013: 15). This intensive form of investigation – an apprenticeship through signs – may constitute a step towards what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) have termed becoming-imperceptible. Becoming-imperceptible is the most extreme form of becoming: it is not a process of mimesis whereby one would simply attempt to imitate/copy the ‘entities’ investigated in a static and enduring world. Rather, it is about aligning oneself and becoming immanent with the places/practices/trajectories that underlie the research process: it is becoming *with* rather than becoming *as*. In that sense, this methodology attempts to adopt a transversal dimension to empirical research; “*it is transversality that permits us, in the train, not to unify the viewpoints of a landscape, but to bring them into communication according to the landscape’s own dimension*” (Deleuze, 2000: 168).

The parallel established between the researcher engaged in an apprenticeship through signs and Marcel attempting to unveil the truth of Combray (Deleuze, 2000), the swimmer learning to swim (Deleuze, 2004) and the Egyptologist obsessed with the interpretation and the decipherment of signs, can also be extended to the image of the spider (Deleuze, 2000). Within this image we have an encounter with a web full of resonances, vibrations, intensive forces and sensations as “*without eyes, without nose,*

without mouth, she answers only to signs, the merest sign surging through her body and causing her to spring upon her prey” (Deleuze, 2000: 182). An apprenticeship through signs encourages us to explore these complex and multiple webs of relations, intensive forces and sensations that prompt and direct our attention through innumerable and relational assemblage of signs. While such a process of re-searching, account-making and writing may allow us to engage differently with these complex and intensive worlds, we also need to constantly reflect on our practices to ensure that we avoid becoming lost or blinded by our webs of textual metaphors (Bray, 2012) and our attention to certain encounters and signs.

REFERENCES

Antonioli M (2012) The Literary Machine. *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 16(2): 157-170.

Aroles J (2015) Performance and Becoming Rethinking Nativeness in Virtual Communities. *Games and Culture*, DOI: 1555412015616714.

Back L and Puwar N (Eds.). (2012) *Live methods*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Biehl J and Locke P (2010) Deleuze and the Anthropology of Becoming. *Current Anthropology*, 51(3): 317-351.

Bogue R (2001) Difference and Repetition in Deleuze's Proustian Sign and Time Machine. *Concentric: Studies in English Literature and Linguistic* 27(1): 1-28.

Bonelli C (2015) Eating one's worlds: On foods, metabolic writing and ethnographic humor. *Subjectivity*, 8(3): 181-200.

Bradshaw M and Williams S (1999) Scales, lines and minor geographies: whither King Island?. *Australian Geographical Studies*, 37(3), 248-26.

Bray PM (2012) Deleuze's Spider, Proust's Narrator. *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 16(5), 703-710.

Coleman R and Ringrose J (2013) *Deleuze and research methodologies*. Edinburgh University Press.

Colombat AP (2000) Deleuze and Signs. In: Buchanan I and Marks J (eds) *Deleuze and Literature*, Edinburgh University Press, pp 14-34.

Crociani-Windland L (2011) *Festivals, affect and identity: a Deleuzian apprenticeship in Central Italian communities*. Anthem Press.

Davies B (2009) Life in Kings Cross: Writing on an immanent plane of composition. In:

Jackson AY and Mazzei LA (eds) *Voice in qualitative inquiry: Challenging conventional, interpretive, and critical conceptions in qualitative research*, London: Routledge, pp 197-220.

Deleuze G (1985) Nomad Thought. In: Allison DB (ed) *The New Nietzsche*, MIT Press, pp 142-149.

Deleuze G (1990) *Logic of Sense*. Columbia University Press.

Deleuze G (1992) *Expressionism in philosophy: Spinoza*. Zone Books.

Deleuze G (2000) *Proust and Signs*. The University of Minnesota Press.

Deleuze G (2004) *Difference and Repetition*. Continuum International Publishing Group.

Deleuze G (2005) *Cinema 2: The time-image*. Continuum International Publishing Group.

Deleuze G and Guattari F (1983) *Anti-Oedipus*. The University of Minnesota Press.

Deleuze G and Guattari F (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus*. The University of Minnesota Press.

Drohan CM (2009) *Deleuze and the Sign*. Atropos Press.

Duff C (2014) *Assemblages of Health: Deleuze's Empiricism and the Ethology of Life*. Springer.

Heidegger M (1968) *What is called thinking?* New York: Harper and Row.

Helmreich S (2007) An anthropologist underwater: Immersive soundscapes, submarine cyborgs, and transductive ethnography. *American Ethnologist*, 34(4): 621-641.

Helmreich S (2011) Nature/culture/seawater. *American Anthropologist*, 113(1): 132-144.

Hughes J (2009) Signs and subjectivity in *Proust and Signs* and *Cinema 1 and 2*. In Bryden M and Topping M (eds) *Beckett's Proust/Deleuze's Proust*, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 47-57.

Jensen CB, Rodje K (2013) *Deleuzian intersections: Science, technology, anthropology*. Berghahn Books.

Latour B (2005) *Reassembling the social*. Oxford University Press.

Latour B (2013) *An inquiry into modes of existence*. Harvard University Press.

Lury C and Wakeford N (2012) *Inventive methods: The happening of the social*. Routledge.

Maclure M (2013) Classification or wonder? Coding as an analytic practice in qualitative research. In Coleman R and Ringrose J (eds) *Deleuze and research methodologies*, Edinburgh University Press, pp. 164-183.

Mahler J (2008) *Lived temporalities: Exploring duration in Guatemala*. Transaction Publishers.

Marcus GE (1995) Ethnography in/of the world system: The emergence of multi-sited ethnography. *Annual review of anthropology*, 95-117.

Marrero-Guillamón I (2015) Monadology and ethnography: towards a Tardian monadic ethnography. *Ethnography* 16(2): 240-261.

Massumi, B. (2002). *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Duke University Press.

Mazzei LA (2010) Thinking data with Deleuze. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 23(5): 511-523.

Mazzei LA and McCoy K (2010) Thinking with Deleuze in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 23(5): 503-509.

Mengue P (2009) Proust/Deleuze: Mnemosyne, Goddess or Factory?. In Bryden M and Topping M (eds) *Beckett's Proust/Deleuze's Proust*, Palgrave Macmillan, pp 58-72.

- Mengue P (2010) *Proust-Joyce, Deleuze-Lacan: lectures croisées*. L'Harmattan.
- Mol A (2008) I eat an apple. On theorizing subjectivities. *Subjectivity* (22): 28–37.^[11]_{SEP}
- Pink S (2009) *Doing Sensory Ethnography*. London: Sage.
- Proust M (2004) *Swann's way: In Search of Lost Time*. Penguin Classics.
- Rabinow P, Marcus GE, Faubion JD and Rees T (2008) *Designs for an Anthropology of the Contemporary*. Duke University Press.
- Rai AS (2011) For an ethnography toward the virtual: Deleuze's transcendental empiricism and nonlinear ImMedia. *South Asian Popular Culture* 9(3): 313-326.
- Saldanha A (2007) *Psychedelic White: Goa Trance and the viscosity of Race*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Savage M and Burrows R (2007) The coming crisis of empirical sociology. *Sociology* 41(5): 885-899.
- Semetsky I (2006) *Deleuze, education and becoming*. Rotterdam: Sense Publications.
- Semetsky I (2007) Towards a semiotic theory of learning: Deleuze's philosophy and educational experience. *Semiotica* 164: 197-214.

Sloterdijk P (2011) *Bubbles: Spheres I*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e)

St Pierre EA (1997) Nomadic inquiry in the smooth spaces of the field: a preface.
International journal of qualitative studies in education 10(3): 365-383.

Stewart K (2007) *Ordinary Affects*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Strathern M (2005) *Partial Connections*. AltaMira Press.

Tally Jr RT (2010) Nomadography': the 'early' Deleuze and the history of philosophy.
Journal of Philosophy: A Cross-Disciplinary Inquiry 5(11): 15-24.

Vannini P (Ed) (2015) *Non-representational methodologies: Re-envisioning research*.
Routledge.

Viveiros de Castro E (2004) Perspectival anthropology and the method of controlled equivocation. *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*, 2(1), 1.

Viveiros De Castro EV (2009) *Métaphysiques cannibals: Lignes d'anthropologie post-structurale*. Presses Universitaires de France.

Wagner R (2001) *An Anthropology of the Subject: Holographic Worldview in New Guinea and Its Meaning and Significance for the World of Anthropology*. Berkeley:

University of California Press.

Zourabichvili F (1994) *Deleuze: Une philosophie de l'évènement*. Presses Universitaires de France.

ⁱ First published in 1964.

ⁱⁱ The term “nomadography” has been used in the literature to refer to the anti-Hegelian way in which Deleuze engages with the history of philosophy (Tally, 2010).

ⁱⁱⁱ There is a parallel here with the concept of the rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987).

^{iv} First published in 1968.

^v The idea of a literary machine involves that one should not look for some form unity underlying Proust's Search, but rather engage with the ways in which fragments assemble through various encounters in order to affirm the difference underlying the Search (Antonioli, 2012)

^{vi} While this is not the focus of this paper, we may want to note that the four kinds of signs detailed by Deleuze (2000) correspond to four forms of time: the time that passes, the time one loses, the time one regains, and regained time (Bogue, 2001; Hughes, 2009).

^{vii} First published in 1913.

^{viii} We can note here the striking similarity with Heidegger (1968): “*We shall never learn what ‘is called’ swimming, for example, or what it ‘calls for’, by reading a treatise on swimming. Only the leap in the river tells us what is called swimming*” (1968: 21).

^{ix} The concepts of smooth and striated spaces have been deployed in various fields of inquiry, including geography (Bradshaw and Williams, 1999), the exploration of online spaces (Aroles, 2015) just to name but a few.

^x It may be worth noting that such stance bears similarities with the idea of following the actors (Latour, 2005).

^{xi} In the same line of thought, Maclure (2013) argues that the practice of coding can opened up in order to engage with the flows and intensities underlying empirical research.